



**TESTIMONY OF CONNIE HARVEY  
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AMERICAN RED CROSS**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation  
Consumer Protection, Product Safety, Insurance, and Data Security Subcommittee**

**“Pool Safety: The Tenth Anniversary of the Virginia Graeme Baker  
Pool and Spa Safety Act”**

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you on behalf of the American Red Cross. We applaud your efforts today to bring attention to the important issue of keeping children and families safe around the water. I am the Director of the Red Cross Aquatics Centennial Initiatives and serve as a longtime advocate and spokesperson for pool and water safety.

The work of the Red Cross impacts lives every day – down the street, across the country and around the world. We help those affected by disasters; provide services to our military, veterans and their families; collect blood and blood products for patients; teach life saving courses and, internationally, partner with organizations to assist those in need.

We are able to achieve our mission through the power of volunteers and the generosity of the American public. Each day, through the Red Cross, thousands of people provide compassionate care to those in need. And, we do this every day because the Red Cross is needed every day.

Today, I am focusing on our preparedness and health and safety programs. About 16,000 times a day, a person receives life saving Red Cross health and safety training, which includes cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification, automated external

defibrillator (AED) training, babysitting courses and, of course, learning to swim. Throughout the nation, the Red Cross is working with essential partners in serving communities by teaching children and adults to swim and how to be safe in and around water.

Whether people live inland or by the water, they seek water for many reasons - recreation, fitness, sport - to name a few. We strongly believe that water safety knowledge and swimming are life skills that everyone should know.

### **American Red Cross Aquatics History**

In 1914, the Red Cross teamed up with established lifesaver Commodore Wilbert Longfellow to form the National American Red Cross Life Saving Corps. Longfellow realized the rising death toll from drowning could become a national tragedy unless new safety standards were introduced. While building the Red Cross Life Saving Corps, the Commodore took on the additional challenge of providing sound, large-scale instruction in swimming.

And, for the next 33 years, Longfellow and the Red Cross along with other partners, such as the Boy Scouts and the YMCA, worked together in advancing the life saving and water safety program.

This work speaks for itself – not only did we see the nation's drowning rate cut in half, we also witnessed a surge in the popularity of swimming, boating and other water activities. At the time of Longfellow's death in 1947, we estimate about 80 million Americans were participating in some form of aquatics recreation.

Today, Longfellow's legacy lives on. 103 years later, the American Red Cross Lifeguarding and Swimming and Water Safety programs are still helping keep Americans safer around the water. Each year more than 2.5 million people learn to swim from Red Cross Water Safety Instructors, and more than 325,000 lifeguards are trained to help protect America's pools, water parks and non-surf waterfronts.

While the hallmarks of the early Red Cross Lifesaving and Water Safety program can clearly be seen today, the Red Cross continues to evolve with the times and provide the highest quality educational methods, including embracing technology with simulation learning and our mobile applications, such as our Red Cross Swim App, designed to teach parents and children about water safety and track their progress through learning to swim.

Through the work and guidance of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council, Red Cross aquatics programs of today are based on the latest available science related to life saving, resuscitation and first aid as well as teaching methods and instructional design.

Our Aquatics sub-council of the Scientific Advisory Council has developed the Circle of Drowning Prevention, Chain of Drowning Survival and a definition of water competency as a means to educate the general public about the knowledge and skills that everyone should know to help keep them safer in and around water.

### **Drowning in the United States: Startling Statistics & the American Red Cross Response**

Even with our ongoing effort to motivate all Americans to learn to swim, over the last decade, the national drowning rate averages more than 3,500 deaths per year.

Consider these alarming facts presented in 2016 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- An average of ten people each day die from unintentional drowning.
- Drowning is responsible for more deaths among children ages one to four than any other cause except birth defects.
- Among our children between one and 14 years of age, drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury-related death, only behind motor vehicle crashes.
- For every child who dies from drowning, another five receive emergency care for nonfatal submersion injuries.

Even more concerning is that drownings do not affect everyone equally. Children, males, minorities (particularly African-American and Hispanic populations) and those in rural areas are at a greater risk for drowning.

The Red Cross believes these numbers are unacceptable, especially knowing that drowning is preventable.

A 2014 survey, conducted for the Red Cross, found that while 80 percent of Americans said they could swim, only 56 percent of the self-described swimmers can perform all five of the basic skills that could save their life in the water.

These critical water safety skills, also known as “water competency,” are the ability to:

1. Step or jump into water over your head;
2. Return to the surface and float or tread water for one minute;
3. Turn around in a full circle and find an exit;
4. Swim 25 yards to the exit; and
5. Exit from the water. If in a pool, be able to exit without using the ladder.

The survey also found that nearly half of Americans (46 percent) report that they have had an experience in the water where they were afraid they might drown. In addition, one in five (19 percent) said they knew someone who had drowned, and 20 percent knew someone who experienced a non-fatal drowning.

In 2014, the World Health Organization released the *Global Report on Drowning*, affirming the Red Cross belief that a proven strategy to prevent drowning is to improve swimming and water safety skills.

This may sound simple, but, actually, our response is not an easy task and the Red Cross must engage in a multi-pronged endeavor in order address these statistics. Our continuous outreach includes increasing access to swim lessons, motivating everyone (youth and adults) to overcome barriers and learn about water safety, and creating a sustainable ecosystem of water safety that engages the next generation.

Unsatisfied with the occurrence of any preventable drowning and deaths, the Red Cross is continuing our legacy of helping to save lives in, on and around the water.

### **American Red Cross Aquatics Centennial Campaign**

In 2014, to mark our 100 year anniversary since the Red Cross added drowning prevention to its mission, we launched our Aquatics Centennial Campaign. We set a goal of helping 50,000 more people in 50 communities learn to swim and learn about water safety to help reduce the drowning rate in these communities.

Additionally, we set out to develop 1,000 more lifeguards and water safety instructors, train parents and caregivers in pediatric CPR/AED and offer water safety education for families.

We selected 50 communities where the drowning rate is higher than the national average (1.13 per 100,000) or where a high number of drownings occur.

Our effort is two-fold: providing basic swimming and safety skills to be water competent and delivering knowledge on how to prevent, recognize and respond to aquatic emergencies to families who likely would not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in this training.

However, creating a culture of water safety is a challenge, especially in communities with little or no resources dedicated to such an effort. Therefore, the Centennial Campaign focuses on **6 goals**. It is through these key prevention strategies that we are able to reach more individuals and families with our message.

#### ***1. Teaching Learn to Swim Classes***

In partnership with local Red Cross Licensed Training Provider facilities, our courses teach people the abilities to swim, think and act safely around the water. These courses center on water survival, safety and swimming skills, with a strong emphasis on drowning prevention and water safety.

While we most often serve children, we encourage adults to participate in these classes as well. We believe that water safety is a family activity and experience. For example, if a mom becomes more comfortable in the water, she may be more confident in enrolling her child in a swim class. Or, if an older teen gains the fundamentals of swimming, she now has the skills and confidence to enter a Lifeguarding or Water Safety Instructor course.

## ***2. Offering Water Safety Education***

In addition to learning to swim, children need to be taught how to make safe decisions around the water. Red Cross Longfellow's WHALE Tales (an acronym for Water Habits Are Learned Early), which was first introduced in 1988, is a water safety education program that teaches children potentially life saving decision-making skills. The program includes lessons on the importance of swimming only in designated swimming areas that are supervised by lifeguards, how to look out for dangerous conditions, to swim with a buddy and help a person in trouble in the water by reaching or throwing an object.

The best thing about our WHALE Tales program is that it can be delivered on dry land, beyond the swim lesson setting, and brought into the community through day cares, camps and schools.

## ***3. Enrolling Parents/Caregivers in Pediatric CPR/AED Training***

For every family with a child enrolled at a participating facility, parents and caregivers have the opportunity to attend a Red Cross Pediatric CPR/AED course at no charge. In the time it may take for emergency help to arrive, a bystander's CPR skills could save someone's life. Bystander training is the cornerstone of our Red Cross preparedness mission. The earlier CPR is started and an AED is on the scene, the better chance of improved outcome for the victim.

## ***4. Training Lifeguards***

Every community needs a pipeline of experienced and certified lifeguards to provide reliable protection for water recreation activities.

According to the CDC, lifeguards rescue more than 100,000 persons from drowning each year. Actually, the most frequent actions of lifeguards are to prevent drowning from

ever happening, such as warning individuals away from dangerous areas and suggesting that poor swimmers stay in shallow water. Without a doubt, trained, professional lifeguards have significantly reduced drowning deaths in the United States.

### ***5. Training Water Safety Instructors***

Water Safety Instructors are instrumental in creating and sustaining a water safety culture. They are part of our “train the trainer” outreach effort. We are helping develop much needed swim instructors who will help advance our message well beyond the Centennial Campaign.

### ***6. Raising Awareness***

Ultimately, specifically through the Centennial Campaign and, more broadly through the Red Cross aquatics mission, this program attempts to change the behavior of parents and caregivers by empowering them to be actively involved in drowning prevention. All are encouraged to apply their new skills and knowledge every time they are near the water in order to prevent drownings and to save lives.

As we head into our fourth year of the Centennial Campaign, we are working with 51 partners in 87 communities in 200 aquatic facilities across 17 states. We are serving vulnerable areas within these communities, such as those served by rental assistance or with special designations for additional services like “neighborhood strategy area” or “transforming neighborhoods initiatives.” Already, more than 45,000 sets of swim lessons have been delivered to help children and adults gain the life skill of swimming.

The Centennial Campaign has trained nearly 900 lifeguards and Water Safety and Basic Swim Instructors in these same communities. And, we are developing future lifeguards through more than 800 youth who have completed Junior Lifeguarding.

More than 3,000 parents and caregivers have participated in training to help them make good choices for their families around the water and to know what to do to respond in a water emergency until help arrives.

These partnerships are providing accessible, affordable, high quality swim lessons, by starting up or expanding swim lessons and reaching those in at-risk and underserved

communities. Without this program, these individuals and families would not have the tools and resources necessary to help build a swimming and water safety culture.

While we are well on our way to achieving our service delivery goals, there is so much more work to be done to drive down the drowning rate in our country. It takes partnerships, like those we have with our training providers of parks and recreation departments, youth-service organizations, and many, many others.

### **Virginia Graeme Baker Act: 10th Anniversary**

Today, we are recognizing the 10th anniversary of the Virginia Graeme Baker Act (VGBA) and its impact on pool and spa safety. The requirements set forth in the VGBA are making the pools and spas across this nation "physically" safer. And while this first-of-its-kind federal law regulates public facilities, the effects are also very evident in residential pools and spas with much safer equipment in the marketplace and a heightened awareness of the dangers of drains.

In addition to the requirements that help prevent injuries due to suction entrapment eviscerations from drains and other fittings in pools and spas, the Act mandated a public information campaign with a goal to prevent drowning and entrapment incidents in pools and spas nationwide. The result is the CPSC's *Pool Safely* Campaign.

The Red Cross has been an active partner of the CPSC and the *Pool Safely* Campaign from the very beginning. *Pool Safely* is providing vital resources to aquatic facilities across the nation that help raise awareness of the risks associated with the water and the dangers of drain entrapment at a very grass roots level. But the messages are also very empowering, providing critical water safety information - and action steps - that saves lives.

We at the Red Cross believe in the *Pool Safely* motto: Simple Steps Save Lives. It is true that you do not know which step it is, until it does. This motto embodies the spirit of the need for partnerships among our organizations. You do not know which organization's message or programs will resonate with someone and convince them to take actions like put a fence around their pool, enroll in swim lessons, learn CPR or



replace their drain cover with one that is VGBA compliant – but it may only take one to save a life.

### **The Need for Continued Collaboration**

To make a real impact in reducing drowning, there must be strong coalitions of national organizations, such as Water Safety USA, a coalition of non-profits and governmental agencies that share a common mission of drowning prevention. Together, we are able to amplify one another's work and help raise awareness of the need for swimming lessons for all and the importance of knowing basic water safety concepts and how to respond when things go wrong.

I am proud of the Aquatics industry that is coming together for our common mission to stop drowning with high profile awareness activities. Earlier this month, with our Diversity in Aquatics partners, on International Water Safety Day held on May 15, collectively we reached 1 million people around the globe with water safety messages. We look forward to the World's Largest Swimming Lesson on June 22, which is a day to highlight that swim lessons save lives.

We are honored and humbled to work with families who have faced the tragedy of drowning and drain entrapment, such as The ZAC Foundation, Stew Leonard III Children's Charities and Drennen's Dreams. They share their tragic stories - and from their heartbreak, we are working together to prevent them from happening again.

But, it will take us all working together to do so.

### **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that the need to train children and adults water safety and swimming skills is not only essential, it is life saving. Through our ongoing efforts, with particular focus on our Aquatics Centennial Campaign, the Red Cross can help provide access in communities with the greatest need to develop the skills and behaviors to make families and communities safer, to be responsible around the water and to know how to help and protect each other and their future generations.

Again, thank you for giving the American Red Cross an opportunity to provide information about our ongoing aquatics programs and highlight our Centennial Campaign initiatives. We are proud of our work as we continue to advance water safety training efforts to help reduce drowning and deaths in communities across the nation.

I am happy to address any questions you may have.